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MAGYAR SZEMLE AND THE CONSERVATIVE MOBILIZATION AGAINST *VÖLKISCH* IDEOLOGY AND GERMAN *VOLKSGESCHICHTE* IN 1930s HUNGARY

GERGELY ROMSICS

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In the 1930s in Hungary, the periodical *Magyar Szemle* (*Hungarian Review*) ranked as the foremost intellectual review of conservative thinking. Edited by the pro-establishment historian Gyula Szekfű, the journal provided important intellectual ammunition to the traditionalists of the right, in other words those who for various reasons sought to hold on to István Bethlen's version of moderate conservatism in ideology and a parliamentary system of limited pluralism and authoritarian checks in practice. The 1930s, however, bore witness to several challenges to the Horthy regime. The rise of the extreme right and the emancipatory (though often also fervently nationalist) program of the so-called *népi* (populist or *narodniki*) writers presented coherent political alternatives to the prevailing order for the first time since the marginalization and emaciation of the left in the wake of the 1918–19 revolutions. Simultaneously, the country had to grapple with the emergence of Nazi Germany as an expansionist great power in the region. In this complicated situation, authors of *Magyar Szemle* confronted what they perceived as a dual threat: the increasing appeal of German imperialism and German political and historical thinking. Many intellectuals of the time, feeling that the German political challenge should be resisted through the adoption and adaptation of innovative German thinking on politics and history, espoused the new ideologies emanating from the unquestioned cultural center of Central Europe in some form. *Magyar Szemle*, however, emerged as a hub for public intellectuals who sought to hold on to a conservatism both more traditional and more open to some of the ideas of liberalism and who refused to abandon the established view of Hungarian history for a more ethnically conscious vision of the past. In the context of the dual German challenge of the 1930s, *Magyar Szemle* represented a site of intellectual resistance not so much against direct German political ambitions but against the new wave of German political thought and interpretations of history.

Keywords: *Magyar Szemle*, *völkisch* idea, National Socialism, populism, historicism, Hungarian history, conservative revolution

The Rise of the *Völkisch* Idea in German Historiographical and Political Thought

Germany in the 1920s seemed almost beyond comprehension and explanation even to its contemporaries. Every observer noted that a vast process of ideological and cultural fermentation was underway. The meanings of key political terms, foundational concepts of social and state life, were changing, while various groups, periodicals and institutions were taking shape, ceasing to exist, undergoing transformations, or falling into insignificance. Nonetheless, with the passing of years it became increasingly evident that this process had spilled over in a particular direction: an ideology had acquired solid form that, having expelled the one-time right-wing and left-wing companions-in-arms as now ideologically incompatible, was articulating ever more clearly its views and conception of the world. The new notions around which *völkisch* conservative revolutionary thinking was organized reinterpreted the relationship between state and nation. Whereas before 1914 the Prussian heritage, in other words the cult of the state, had unambiguously marked the mentality, from the realm of scholarship to the public square, after 1919 a new actor gained increasing prominence in German history and the vision of a brighter German future: the *Volk*.

Historicism, the view of the past that had dominated German historiography throughout much of the 19th century and well into the 20th, proceeded from the hypothesis that in the course of history specific political and conceptual forces exercise an influence in accordance with the exigencies of different eras and the prevailing thought of a given period.¹ These forces are manifest first and foremost in the organization of the state, which can be conceptualized as the objective form of political will and ideas. Accordingly, the state represents a scale of values and strives to attain set goals. In the international context these goals can come into conflict with one another, but they are also subject to change. The conception of the state itself can be permanent, but the path leading to its political realization and its realization itself change as a function of prevailing circumstances. Thus for the historicist, ideas and *Realpolitik* create and write history collectively. It is however important to note that each of these actors, as it were, is conceived of as a product of history, indeed the historical nature of their being is their most basic quality. For this reason there can exist no generally applicable measure of validity. The political conduct of a state must be analyzed as the course of a particular idea and institutional system, both products of history, moving ever closer to the attainment of perfection.

The *Volk*, the subject of the new cult, brought with it a reassessment of the past and a newly formed image of the future. The most intellectually active forces of the German right began to seek the answer to the question of the nature and substance of the (alleged) peculiar German quality, the “core” (the German *Volkstum*)

that, independent of history, distinguished Germans from all other nations. In the history of ideas the products of this conception and the perspectives to which it gave shape are denoted with the expression *völkischer Gedanke*, or *völkisch* idea, while the larger processes of intellectual fermentation are known as the “conservative revolution” or “young conservatism”.

Many members of the old right-wing intellectual elite and professors occupying influential positions in academic life were unable to identify with the new manner of thinking. They did not vanish from public life, although their informal positions were shaken, and henceforth they no longer determined the guiding principles and terminologies of political and historical thinking. For many members of the younger generation and innumerable public groups, not to mention right-wing political forces, their conceptions, which seemed too Western and liberal and at the same time too conservative, were no longer decisive. Their thinking, which emphasized the strength of the state and history, was unacceptable for many, as the German state had cracked and almost crumbled in 1918 and 1919, and history had seemed to forsake the nation. New ideas were needed that would prove that other, more enduring, forces would counterbalance political failure. Thus for many the notion according to which the German *Volk* was an eternal force, independent of the state and capable of defying history, was appealing. More so than ever, the prevailing winds of the new era were “German winds”.

According to the emerging view of history, race and state, the *Volk* bears its own idea within itself and struggles in the course of history for self-realization. In this context historical will, which 19th century historicism conceives of as intention brought into being in the form of a state, is not the product of historical possibilities and exigencies, but the temporal manifestation of an ahistorical instinct. In other words the roots of the identity of a historical agent do not lie in history itself, but rather exist *a priori* as ideas or *völkisch* character that predates statehood. From this point of view, whether a narrative proceeds from the concept of the *Volkstum* or the race is of secondary importance. In other words *Volksgeschichte* is essentially compatible with racial history (*Rassengeschichte*), understood in the strict sense of the term. In both cases the important thing is that the “individuality of the German people” is posited as a quality existing above history, the constancy of which in the face of changes is functionally and textually more important than its source in race or ethnic group.²

In the ideology of *Volksgeschichte*, the state springs from the *Volk*, and the measure of its workings is their correspondence to the character of the *Volk*, the balance of the achievements and failings in the creation of the conditions necessary for its development. The goal of social history was to reveal this eternal ethnic character and demarcate the range of its influence. The historiographical reflection of this school of thought thus also preserved the fundamental premise according to which “the ‘*Volk*’ precedes the state”.³ One of the vital tasks of this his-

toriography in the demarcation of historical periods was the establishment of periods of (alleged) ascension and (alleged) decline, of the “rise” and “ebb” of the tides of the *Volk*.⁴ Parallel to this, however, it strove to reveal the ahistorical substance, the posited permanence awaiting discovery beneath the flow of political history. In other words it endeavored to give a historical reconstruction of “the inimitable soul, impossible to counterfeit, of the *Volk*, bound to the soil and to its homeland,” to use the words of Adolf Helbok, one of the radical ideologues of *Volkstumsforschung*.⁵

The *völkisch* idea and German great power ideology were molded together in the revised concept of *Mitteleuropa*, which itself proved to be a very elastic model. Its prototype was the Ottonian Empire, but its territory extended far beyond these borders.⁶ Its single function was clear: “by giving form to Central Europe, to rise to be the leading nation of Europe”, in other words to assume simultaneously its pan-German *völkisch* and supranational regional roles and meet the greatest task springing from the idea of the *Volkstum*.⁷

The ideology of the Third Reich integrated this heritage, as it embedded politics deeply in a myth of destiny and *Volk*, although mixed with a kind of cult of technology and the future that was characteristic of very few of the currents of the conservative revolution.⁸ Thus the *völkisch* idea, which became the canon under the Weimar Republic and was linked to notions of order and empire under the Third Reich (although maintaining its essential contents), bore peculiarly German, anti-liberal and often anti-modernist ideological connotations. In its final and most propagandistic incarnation under National Socialism the term eventually became a strategic ideologeme expressing transcendence of social disparities and differences of worldview, signifying bonds more general even than the state, and mandating eastward expansion (territorial or political) as a direct outgrowth of the geographical position and political character of the German *Volk*.

Initial Responses to *Volksgeschichte* in Hungary

The reception of the scholarship of the Weimar Republic in Hungary seems to have been a bit slow if one considers that the educated stratum of Hungarian public life followed trends in the German academia with close attention. On the other hand, it could be regarded as surprisingly fast in comparison with the reception of late historicism, which took some fifty years to show its influence in Hungary. It is worthwhile to identify the basic milestones of this process. Towards the end of the 1920s one can discern in the pages of the journals *Századok* (Centuries) and *Magyar Szemle*, first in the reviews and later in articles, a tendency to interpret German *völkisch* history as a political threat. In this context there was no rift between Hungarian scholarly life and public discourses. The concept of *völkisch*

Mitteleuropa constituted a threat to the existence of the Hungarian nation because it regarded a considerable part of the historical (and present) lands of the country as German *Volksboden* and an even larger part as German *Kulturboden*. From this perspective every German work that dealt with the geography, culture or history of the German communities of Hungary was interpreted as a challenge to the ambition of Hungarian politics to assert control in the region. This sense of threat was reinforced by the swing to the right in German politics, but also by the debate that had broken out well before 1933 among the German communities of Hungary concerning their identity as members of the Hungarian political community or the German *Volk*. At stake was the question of whether the German minority would define itself collectively with reference to the Hungarian state or the German fatherland. In other words, would it withdraw from the community of the host state and thereby implicitly also from its jurisdiction?⁹

Parallel to the reception of new German expansionist thinking, a rupture took place in the Hungarian scholarly community, and the battle between historicism and the *völkisch* view of the past began. The goal for both tendencies was to avert the danger of the German threat, but they nonetheless came into conflict with each other because of their profound ideological differences. *A történetírás új útjai* (The New Paths of Historiography), edited by Bálint Hóman and published in 1931, attests clearly to the fact that the reception of the methods and theories of German scholarship in Hungary had not yet identified the profoundly divisive rift in German historiography between late historicism and *Volksgeschichte*.¹⁰ Both Gyula Szekfű and Elemér Mályusz contributed to the volume, both under the heading of *Geistesgeschichte*, which each author used as a synonym for contemporary historiography. In contrast, in German historiography there had been a continuous debate since the publication of the works of social history by Karl Lamprecht on the constitution of the *Volk* and the collective psyche. The last stage of the debate in Germany was the canonization of the *völkisch* reading of history described above, which also represented the close of the historicist era. The initial obliviousness to this debate in Hungary and its subsequent sudden incorporation into scholarly thinking is illustrated again by the fact that in 1932 Szekfű wrote the preface to *A magyar nemzet története az ősidőktől napjainkig* (The History of the Hungarian Nation from Ancient Times to the Present Day), by Miklós Asztalos and Sándor Pethő.¹¹ In 1934, however, when Asztalos's text was published as an independent volume with only slight modifications,¹² Szekfű attacked his views in a highly critical review published in *Magyar Szemle*. His review, which had the dimensions of a self-standing essay, was entitled *Népiség, nemzet és állam* (Volkstum, Nation, State). It has since become famous as the first reaction of Hungarian historicism and conservatism, not to the German challenge, but to the new methodology of historiography stemming from the *völkisch* school of thought.¹³

In the 1930s *Magyar Szemle*, the representative conservative periodical, continued to publish reviews and articles on the institutional and methodological innovations of German historical scholarship every year. In the light of these, in 1934 *Volksgeschichte*, which initially and quite inexplicably had simply been thought of as part of *Geistesgeschichte*, was given separate treatment, both by historians and in public discourse. In contrast to Szekfű, the young although already well-known Mályusz believed that in opposition to German *Volksgeschichte*, which functioned to legitimize German supremacy, Hungarian historiography should emphasize Hungarian *Volksgeschichte*. In other words Hungarian historians should borrow their model from German scholarship, although with the aim of fighting off German political ambitions. However, Mályusz's approach demanded the use of terminological and conceptual tools viewed by the authors of *Magyar Szemle* as inapplicable to Hungary (as they expressed in a series of articles beginning in 1935).¹⁴ Thus a methodological and theoretical debate became inevitable.¹⁵

The spark that ignited the debate was, as already mentioned, the publication in 1934 of Asztalos's *A nemzetiségek története Magyarországon a betelepüléstől máig*, the first work of Hungarian historiography deliberately written from the perspective of *Volksgeschichte* (although it bore numerous traces of the traditional view of history as well). In 1928 Asztalos, who had completed his doctorate in 1922, took a long trip to Germany, where he became familiar with the methodologies of *Volksgeschichte*.¹⁶ His oeuvre exemplifies how an author who began on the history of nationalities came to found the school of Hungarian *Volksgeschichte* on the basis of the methodologies of German scholarship. *A nemzetiségek története Magyarországon* focuses on the collapses, in Asztalos' view inseparably intertwined, of the Habsburg Monarchy and the Hungarian state. In his analysis of the processes of collapse, the premises of German *Volksgeschichte*, according to which the history of the Habsburg state should be read first and foremost as a history of dissolution, entered into a synergistic relationship with the notion of the viability of the Hungarian state. The *Volksgeschichte* critique of the idea of multinational statehood offered an explanation as to why historical Hungary, seen otherwise by Asztalos as viable, disintegrated. Its fall was a consequence of the place it held in the larger framework of a multinational state, in other words a state that stood in opposition to the ineluctable energies of the *Volk*.¹⁷

Asztalos' work deserves particular emphasis in a discussion of the history of ideologies in Hungary. He was the first Hungarian historian to juxtapose the superficiality of political activity, the essential subject of historicism, with the profoundness of *völkisch* politics, which allegedly rested on the laws of nature. He was also the first to subordinate human agency to a force that existed independently of history. This force created an interpretive and critical framework for the assessment of every historical era and event from a fixed, *völkisch* perspective

(the only point of view recognized as valid). History lost its autotelic quality and its open-ended character, while politics and human agency lost the freedom of determining their aims. Furthermore, *A nemzetiségek története Magyarországon* constituted the first work of Hungarian *völkisch* historiography to be met with broader interest in Hungarian public thinking at the time (first and foremost in Szekfű's aforementioned critical review), and it represented the first consistent attempt to rethink Hungarian history through an organic coupling of the findings and methodologies of German and Hungarian *Volksgeschichte*. The attention it was given, however, was not solely a response to the assertions contained in the text. At the time Hungarian public discourse was growing sensitive to the challenges issued in the discourses of German scholarship, and in its attempts to offer replies to these challenges Hungarian intellectual life on the right was gradually splitting in two. It made little difference that the greater part of Asztalos's book had been published some seven years earlier. Its publication in 1934 for the first time as an independent volume coincided with and no doubt contributed to the appearance, in mature form, of the reactions to German influence.

***Magyar Szemle* and Resistance to the *Völkisch* View of History**

While *Századok*, which had an extensive review section, may have offered the most detailed expositions of the products of German historiography, *Magyar Szemle* was nonetheless the most influential organ of their social reception. Between 1929 and 1932 one can discern a palpable increase in interest in *Volkswissenschaft* and German concepts of foreign policy, but from 1932 this interest turned into deliberate resistance. The turning point may have come when Otto Albrecht Isbert, a minor German researcher, expounded on the distinctive aspects of the *völkisch* view of history, emphasizing the point that, while "consciousness of *völkisch* solidarity was increasingly overshadowing the old notion of the state", this naturally would not alter the "ineluctable interdependency" of the German and Hungarian peoples.¹⁷ He nonetheless attacked the old Lesser German and Greater Hungarian views of history, which in his view "saw only the state, not the *Volk*".¹⁸ Mályusz noted this as well in a subsequent essay in which he characterized the state-centric approach of "Bismarck and his contemporaries" as outdated, arguing that since 1919 "the state has grown pallid, and its place in political thinking has been taken over by the *Volkstum*, unbound from state borders". Turning against Isbert, however, Mályusz cautioned against the threats posed by the new form of nationalism in German historiography, calling for the invigoration of "Hungarian cultural nationalism," which "would spur the spiritual resistance of the Hungarian race".¹⁹

However, *Magyar Szemle* did not adopt Mályusz's program of countering the German challenge by using the methodology of the "invader" to refute his arguments and detect the contours of a strong *völkisch* Hungarian state in centuries past and future. On the contrary, the two above-mentioned essays remained something of an isolated phenomenon. In contrast, a rather homogeneous discourse was taking shape at the time that brought together critical interrogation of current politics, philosophy of history and identity politics, and history itself. Adopting the main premises of Szekfű's view of history, it attacked the newly emerging ideological danger. As part of the critical scrutiny of contemporary political tendencies, the works addressing the situation in Germany and Austria specifically examined the effects of the *völkisch* idea in the two countries. Shortly before the publication of the two essays, Gyula Moravek had already analyzed the influence of the "*Volkstum Gedanke*", which he interpreted as a reaction to defeat in the war, the threat of "Americanization", and Marxism, anticipating or even presaging the radicalization of these ideas under National Socialism.²⁰ Another essay examined a further aspect of *völkisch* ideology in the search for an explanation of the appeal of Nazi ideas among the petite bourgeoisie and the youth. In the view of its author, Elek Máthé, "the Germans [were] again on the road towards making themselves unpopular among other peoples, not through the *parvenu* arrogance of Germany under Kaiser Wilhelm, but rather through the deification of their race".²¹ Noted historian Béla Pukánszky's literary review expanded its scope to include popular literature, arriving at the conclusion that in German literature "the outlines of the idealized image of a new ideal collective are emerging".²² Other writings called attention to the extremism of Rosenberg's myths of race and the danger of a general shift in the political spectrum of the Weimar Republic to the right, as other parties were swept up in the currents of Nazi radicalism.²³

In contrast to the political trends in Germany, Austria, which was also undergoing a general shift to the right (although in the direction of the corporatist state, not the National Socialist dictatorship), was seen in a considerably more positive light. In 1932 – quite early – a detailed account of Austrian identity-political endeavors was published, emphasizing in particular the work of Joseph Lux and Friedrich Funder and the allegedly Latin features of the new Austrian self-image. The account did not fail to mention, however, the fact that a significant segment of society, in particular the youth, were committed adherents of the *grossdeutsch* (or Greater German) idea.²⁴ In an essay published in *Magyar Szemle* in 1934, Csaba Csapody took a clear stand in support of the view according to which Dollfuss's new order and new creed, which were both "German and independent", might prove able to advance the true mission of the German *Volk* (understood as disseminating culture in Central Europe and declared as having been abandoned in favor of Nazi saber-rattling), and he strove to maintain an optimistic view of the chances for the survival of an independent Austria. In general, *Magyar Szemle* accepted

and positively appraised the identity politics project of the corporatist Austrian state, which it saw as a political ideology that offered Austrians a regional and open German identity, in contrast to the racial and *völkisch* premises of National Socialist thought. Proceeding from a conviction in the power of history to shape a collective mindset, it was hoped that the new consciousness would inoculate Austrian society against the allure of Nazi ideas, making Austria itself capable of fulfilling its old historical role in a new form and under new circumstances.²⁵

As a kind of mirror image of this identity project, in writings that were published in *Magyar Szemle* and elsewhere, the same authors, in addition to noting the threat posed by the German *völkisch* idea, strove to present an authentic Hungarian and conservative political and historical alternative in which the two dimensions were inseparably mixed. The historicist outlook became one of the foundations for fleshing out this alternative. In contrast to the saturation of the *grossdeutsch* idea with *völkisch* ideology, the new conservative-historicist synthesis emphasized “only [the continuity of] the Hungarian political idea”, positioning it as a notion that permits varied ethnic and cultural attachments and reclaims community only in the sphere of constitutional questions and foreign policy. Diverse variations on this idea surfaced repeatedly in the periodical. Jakob Bleyer, for instance, who as a prominent member of the German minority in Hungary and leader for a time of the Ungarnländische Deutsche Volksbildungsverein was fighting against his own *völkisch* opposition, came out in defense of “multilingual and multinational Hungary”, the legacy of which was more universal than the new and disturbing “Hungarian racial idea”. Hence the “old” formula was seen as accommodating the nationalities in a firm political alliance within the political nation. One year later Szekfű harshly criticized the advocates of “Hungarian autotelism”, condemning the forces striving to form a “collective Hungarian *völkisch* spirit” and thus forsaking community and solidarity with all the peoples of historical Hungary.²⁶

This notion found its most detailed expression in Tibor Joó’s works on the history of ideas. Joó situated historicism and the Hungarian imperial idea in a tightly intertwined and conceptually interdependent system. Basing his argument on the idea of the imperative to preserve a place among “great nations”, Joó rejected the notions of the populist-*narodniki* writers concerning a future politics based on the confederation of the Hungarian nation and the other small nations of the region. He strove to reinvigorate the tradition of the empire-building equestrian Hungarian nomad, who does not represent a force from before history, but rather a historical people formed over the course of the centuries.²⁷ Furthermore, *Magyar Szemle* was combative in its opposition to the similarly racial “Turanism”, which it saw as a kind of *völkisch* Orientalism that had turned away from the plan of building a regional empire, a task that history had allegedly assigned to the Hungarian people. In general, the periodical represented, in its rejection of racial theories of history,

the historical and voluntary concept of nation and a westward orientation, understood as a necessary consequence of historical experience.²⁸ In an essay published in *Napkelet* (The East) in 1929 Gyula Kornis, who also contributed numerous articles to *Magyar Szemle*, gave pithy expression to the view according to which, “whoever considers himself a member of a nation, is a member of that nation”, and the nation itself, as an “intellectual-ethnic principle”, on the one hand “refers to a community of intellectual and cultural goods” and on the other is manifested through the state in politics.²⁹ Kornis and Joó supported their thesis with references to the German bourgeoisie and its contributions to modern Hungary, which were often the target of attacks by populist-*narodniki* writers.³⁰

The concept of the historical nation was complemented with an increasingly precise definition of the *Geistesgeschichte* version of historicism, i. e., one that emphasized inter-subjective understandings of the historical situations that guided the political actions of communities. This touched on the conceptual exposition of the absolute quality of temporality, the unavoidable relativization of historical assessment, and the dependence on perspective, just as it implied the historical genesis of all social phenomena.³¹ Logically, its application led to the ascertainment of the primacy of the state and the interrogation and rejection of the absoluteness of *Volkstum*, since as an approach *Geistesgeschichte* rejected any notion of ahistorical or absolute facts and phenomena.³²

The Memory of the Monarchy in *Magyar Szemle*: The Multinational State as an Alternative to the *Völkisch* Idea

The definition of the historical place of the Dual Monarchy by members of the circle gathered around *Magyar Szemle* was essentially compatible with Szekfü’s ideas. György Ottlik, chief editor of the *Nouvelle Revue de Hongrie*, characterized the Danubian region as the collision zone of “great historical forces”. In his view, the enduring achievement of the Habsburgs had been the creation of a local synthesis protecting all the peoples of the region, an accomplishment that had not since been surpassed, as the emerging German threat was making clear at the time he was writing.³³ In Ottlik’s view, for instance, Czechoslovakia would eventually have to relinquish any animosity towards its southern neighbors and “seek a rear-guard in Austria and Hungary, either through a joint restoration of the legitimate heir to the Habsburg throne” or by some other means. Otherwise there would be no guarantee of its survival.³⁴ The example of Czechoslovakia shed light on one of the general features of the Danubian territories: given their precarious position in the face of external threats, the peoples of the region had to join forces and find a supranational framework that would ensure the further development of each.³⁵

In the view of these authors, this increasingly urgent necessity also demonstrated that while the collapse of the Dual Monarchy may well have entailed grievous losses for Austria and Hungary from a territorial point of view, from an economic and political point of view it had constituted a blow for all the peoples of the Danubian territories. The obliteration of the division of labor and the assurance of stability represented by the Habsburg Empire made necessary the old-new “political consciousness, understood in the Danubian sense”, and made dangerous the “*völkisch*”, “Turanian”, and “pagan” ideologies that denied the interdependence of the states and nations of the region.³⁶

Within the limitations of a realistic assessment of the circumstances and possibilities at the time, the authors gathered around *Magyar Szemle* saw the most favorable solution to the problems faced (in their assessment) by the peoples of Central Europe in the revival of some multinational structure, thereby breaking from the traditional currents of the Hungarian view of history. Their conclusion entailed a positive reappraisal of the state-building traditions of the Habsburgs. Ottlik, for instance, declared, “From the perspective of *Geistesgeschichte*, during its rule the Habsburg House, standing at the helm of the vast Austrian empire, became the clearest representative of the ‘European’ *Volk*”.³⁷

These conclusions did not, however, entail a complete purging of any memory of the Habsburg-Hungarian conflicts from the texts. Among the authors who gathered around Szekfű, Mihály Ferdinandy, for instance, preserved numerous elements of the Protestant *kuruc* tradition. He considered the Hungarian *Volk* to be “one of the small peoples oppressed by the *Gesamtmonarchie*”, and viewed the Habsburgs as an obstacle to “natural development” and the revival of the “flexible, old, humanist Hungarian state idea of the Middle Ages”. In contrast to Szekfű, Ferdinandy was unambiguous in his claim, in connection with the history of the eighteenth century, that both the course and the limits of development had been determined by the dynasty, and even Domokos Kosáry, a student of Szekfű’s, contended that when the two had come into conflict, the interests of the dynasty had always prevailed over the interests of the Hungarian territories.³⁸

If in connection with the eighteenth century one observes the emergence of competing interpretations, assessments of the Reform Era show a broad consensus. The authors of *Magyar Szemle* and the writers who held similar views shared Kosáry’s conclusion, according to which “the reign of Francis I, which lasted from 1792 to 1830, meant a lost generation for Hungary”.³⁹ Ferdinandy viewed 1848 as a justified response to “the blindness, ill-will, and unintelligence of the government at the turn of the century”, while Kornis saw the struggle for independence as part of the tradition of constitutionalism that had evolved against the absolutist tendencies of the ruling house.⁴⁰

These assessments were not, however, accompanied by any supposition of an underlying necessary opposition between the Habsburg dynasty and the Hungar-

ian *Volk*. The era of Habsburg reaction, in other words the negative “other side” of the Reform Era, remained a period characterized by increasingly tense conflict between two interdependent political actors, a conflict the origins of which simply lay in the mistakes of the Habsburg House. This opposition, however, was not cloaked in any historical-philosophical garb, nor was it cast as an eternal or inevitable antithesis of interest.

The portrayal of the period as a matter of mere incident enabled the authors to interpret 1867 as an unambiguous expression of newly discovered harmony. In the anti-*völkisch* and anti-German discourse of *Magyar Szemle* the Compromise constituted proof of both the interdependence of Hungary and the Habsburg dynasty and the viability of a new (or rather old) order in the Danubian region based on concord and consensus, not *Volkstum* or *völkisch* ideology (nor on an absolutist and unitary basis). Criticism was leveled at the consequences of the Compromise, rather than its principles, including the liberal-nationalist assimilationist furor that engulfed many members of the political class, directing energies away from projects of prosperity in the multinational state towards a fight both with the dynasty and the nationalities over issues of purely symbolic significance.⁴¹ In contrast, the Monarchy was seen as the bearer of genuine, attainable promise, a state the shared dynastic and Hungarian tradition of which had been “precisely that it melted and merged traditions... it had had the spirit of a pastor, tending to its peoples, in other words flocks, at least until the sheep turned into consciously nationalistic wolves”.⁴² The authors only differed in their assessments of the Compromise as either a momentary or an absolute optimum.⁴³

Thus 1867 grew into a mythical moment, an expression of both the resurrection of the thousand-year Hungarian political tradition and the conclusion of the decades-long political battle waged out of necessity against Vienna. For Szekfű, the Hungarian instinct for politics, and thus the claim to empire, was proof of the “mature political realism” forged in “centuries-old foundries” (to offer a summary of his view of the essence of the Compromise, in lieu of a long-winded analysis of *Magyar Történet*, the five-volume history book by Gyula Szekfű and Bálint Hóman published in 1935).⁴⁴ In addition to figuring as evidence of Hungarian political acuity, 1867 was also often cast as a turning point in Szekfű’s writings that essentially abrogated the conflict-ridden system of relations between the Habsburg House and the Hungarians. According to István Bethlen, prime minister from 1921 to 1931 and considered Szekfű’s foremost ally, before 1867 the Habsburgs “had seen the calling of their rule in the territories of the Monarchy as the creation, out of their entire empire, of a state under unified Austrian German leadership, preferably with a German-speaking government”. The Compromise made it clear that the dynasty had had a startling realization: “Its function was not to lay the foundation for the hegemony of the German *Volk* on its territory”. It rec-

ognized that “new tasks had arisen”, thereby marking the beginning of a new era of cooperation and collaboration.⁴⁵

It is significant that the stances of Ottlik and Ferdinandy, the two authors who were the most critical of the Habsburgs, were more favorable in their assessments of 1867 specifically than of Habsburg rule in general. In 1934 Ottlik characterized the Habsburg concept of the state as an idea of “general servitude,” counterbalanced as of 1867 by the open and tolerant “alternative” of Hungarian civilization. In 1936, however, he wrote admiringly of the Compromise in absolute terms, in other words not merely as an improvement over the state structure of the earlier period, but as a good solution in and of itself, and he identified the Habsburg Empire as the state with the most European mentality of the Great Powers.⁴⁶ Similarly, in 1941 Ferdinandy, who earlier had described the Habsburg state as a “swooning” empire disfigured by the “rigid, centuries-old mask” of the dynasty, celebrated the restoration of the Empire in modern form and the reestablishment of the “ancient German–Hungarian equilibrium” by “Hungarian statesmen” and the “wisdom” of Francis Joseph.⁴⁷ He assessed the Compromise on the basis of the fact that after 1867, “the Habsburg Monarchy was able once more, and for the final time, to continue in its role as a Great Power”, while “the Hungarian kingdom again was able to continue its imperial tradition, if perhaps within certain limits”.⁴⁸

As an interpretive move, the decision to place the Compromise on a pedestal demanded an explanation for the collapse of the Monarchy, and first and foremost historical Hungary, other than the inadequacies of the state system of the Dualist Era. The explanation, however, was at hand. Since the publication of Szekfű’s *Három Nemzedék* (Three Generations) in 1920, critical assaults on pre-1918 Hungarian politics were continuously cropping up, whether in Ottlik’s 1933 *Új Hungária* (New Hungary) or in the articles published in *Magyar Szemle*. The attacks focused in particular on political nationalism and chauvinism, which had broken with the autochthonous, tolerant Hungarian imperial idea created by the circumstances of history and the nomadic legacy of the steppes.⁴⁹ This interpretation stood in sharp contradistinction to the *völkisch* imperial idea, which demanded firmness of purpose and offered an antithetical assessment of the era. The discourse called the restraint and political realism of the 1867 generation of politicians (Ferenc Deák, Gyula Andrássy, etc.) to account, in other words the premise, which the Habsburgs had learned to esteem in 1867, that history is not a cycle of collisions of *völkisch* wills, but rather the representation of interests spanning the stages of ever-shifting, open-ended historical development and manifest first and foremost, in the spirit of political realism, in the search for compromise. Firm demands stemming from faith in absolutes constitute little more than stubborn denials of the “other” absolute. The historicist tendencies shared by Szekfű and others

saw the *völkisch* idea as one such combative ideology, taking issue with its (perceived or real) core assumptions and thereby developing into a synthesis of Hungarian conservative and traditional liberal views of history, as well as the most thorough and consistent attempt between the two World Wars to formulate a historicist idea of Hungarian identity.

Conclusion

As the most prominent journal of public conservative thinking in Hungary in the 1930s, *Magyar Szemle* functioned in part as a site of resistance to the tendencies of the conservative revolution and *völkisch* ideology emanating from Germany. Interestingly, the authors of *Magyar Szemle* confronted not only the essentialist ideologies of ascendant National Socialism, but also the ideologically and methodologically similar (even derivative), if politically opposed, notions of the Volk as the guiding principle and ultimate end of history in Hungary as well. As an organ of opposition to *völkisch* ideologies, whether German or Hungarian, *Magyar Szemle* represented an attempt to preserve political conservatism from ethnic essentialisms. This article sought to reconstruct the intellectual mobilization undertaken by Gyula Szekfű with the aim of demonstrating how the *völkisch* challenge had to first be identified as such and could subsequently be proven to be an “inappropriate” logic for interpreting Hungarian history. Interestingly, the anti-*völkisch* mobilization rested not merely on the widespread dislike for Nazism among contributors, but also on their interpretation of Hungary as a site of coexistence under imperial supervision provided by the “core” nation, Hungarians. In this sense, the conservative mobilization and its ideology may hold little appeal today, yet it nevertheless demonstrated the incompatibilities between interwar old and new right-wing thinking, and the potential conservative thought held at the time as a reservoir of counter-ideology to German penetration.

Notes

- ¹ For detailed discussion and thorough analysis of this state-centric approach see the work of Georg Iggers (1997) *Deutsche Geschichtswissenschaft: eine Kritik der traditionellen Geschichtsauffassung von Herder bis zur Gegenwart* (Vienna, Cologne, Weimar: Böhlau).
- ² Bernd Faulenbach (1980) *Ideologie des deutschen Weges: die deutsche Geschichte in der Historiographie zwischen Kaiserreich und Nationalsozialismus* (München, Beck), 33 and 294–5.
- ³ Erich Zöllner (1984) *Probleme und Aufgaben der österreichischen Geschichtsforschung* (Munich: Oldenbourg), 97.

- 4 Wolfgang Wippermann (1981) Der “deutsche Drang nach Osten”: Ideologie und Wirklichkeit eines politischen Schlagwortes (Darmstadt, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft), 102.
- 5 Willi Oberkrome (1993) *Volksgeschichte: methodische Innovation und völkische Ideologisierung in der deutschen Geschichtswissenschaft 1918–1945* (Göttingen, Vandenhoeck&Ruprecht), 38.
- 6 Jürgen Elvert (1999) *Mitteleuropa!: Deutsche Pläne zur europäischen Neuordnung (1918–1945)* (Stuttgart, Steiner), 62.
- 7 Henry Cord Meyer (1955) *Mitteleuropa in German Thought and Action 1918–1945* (Den Haag: Nijhoff), 301; Michel Grunewald (1997) ‘Reichseuropa gegen Paneuropa: Die Europa-Auffassung der jungkonservativen Zeitschrift *Gewissen*’ in Idem, *Le discours européen dans les revues allemandes 1918–1933* (Bern, Lang), 313–42. See in particular 328–9.
- 8 Uwe Ketelsen (1976) *Völkisch-nationale und nationalsozialistische Literatur in Deutschland 1890–1945* (Stuttgart, Metzler), 62; Jeffrey Herf (1984) *Technology, Culture and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 35–7.
- 9 Angela Gröber (2003) “A kisebbségtől a népcsoportig: Fogalmak és elképzelések” (From Minority to Ethnic Group: Terms and Concepts), *Pro Minoritate*, 4, 35–50.
- 10 Bálint Hóman (ed.) (1931) *A magyar történetírás új útjai* (Budapest: Magyar Szemle Társaság); Elemér Mályusz (1931) ‘A népiség története’ in Hóman (ed.) *A magyar történetírás új útjai*, 237–68; Gyula Szekfű (1931) ‘A politikai történetírás’ in Hóman (ed.) *A magyar történetírás új útjai*, 395–444.
- 11 Miklós Asztalos and Sándor Pethő (1933) *A magyar nemzet története az ősidőktől napjainkig* (Budapest: Lantos).
- 12 Miklós Asztalos (1934) *A nemzetiségek története Magyarországon a betelepülésüktől máig* (Budapest: Lantos).
- 13 Gyula Szekfű (1934) “Népiség, nemzet és állam”, *Magyar Szemle*, 22, 5–13.
- 14 Among the most significant of these, in order of the year of publication, one should mention the following: Gyula Szekfű (1936) ‘Politikai érzékünk társadalmi alapjairól’ (The Social Foundations of Our Political Acuity), *Magyar Szemle*, 26, 297–306; András Rónai (1936) ‘Államterület és népiség’ (The Territory of the State and the Volkstum), *Magyar Szemle*, 28, 113–20; Viola Tomori (1937) ‘A német népiség-kutatás’ (German Volkstumsforschung), *Magyar Szemle*, 29, 143–52; Mihály Ferdinandy (1938) ‘A lázadó Koppány mítosza’ (The Mythos of Koppány the Rebel), *Magyar Szemle*, 32, 244–53; Gyula Szekfű (1939) ‘A népi elv két arca’ (The Two Faces of the Völkisch Idea), *Magyar Szemle*, 35, 5–12; István Csekey (1939) ‘Magyarság és asszimiláció’ (Hungarian-ness and Assimilation), *Magyar Szemle*, 36, 16–22.
- 15 Vilmos Erős gives by far the most thorough interpretation of this debate, which is mentioned or studied in its fragmented details by numerous historians. Erős situates the methodological differences of the two historians at the center of his analysis. Vilmos Erős (2000) *A Szekfű–Mályusz-vita* (The Debate between Szekfű and Mályusz) (Debrecen: Csokonai). See in particular 34–53.
- 16 Béla Pomogáts (1999) ‘Magyarság és Erdélyiség – Asztalos Miklós emlékezete’ (Hungarian-ness and Transylvanian-ness – The Remembrances of Miklós Asztalos), *Bárka* (Ark) 4, 50–4.
- 17 Otto Albrecht Isbert (1932) ‘A magyarországi németiség birodalmi német szempontból’ (The Germans of Hungary from the Imperial German Perspective), *Magyar Szemle*, 15, 231–41. See in particular 231.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 238–9.

- ¹⁹ Elemér Mályusz (1932) 'Az új német nacionalizmus történetírása' (The Historiography of the New German Nationalism), *Magyar Szemle*, 15, 241–54. See in particular 241 and 246.
- ²⁰ Endre Moravek (1932) 'A német kaleidoszkóp' (The German Kaleidoscope), *Magyar Szemle*, 14, 127–34. See in particular 130–1.
- ²¹ Elek Máthé (1932) 'Nemzeti gondolat a német nemzeti szocialista mozgalomban' (The National Idea in the German National Socialist Movement), *Magyar Szemle*, 15, 308–20. See in particular 315.
- ²² Béla Pukánszky (1932) 'A mai német regény' (The German Novel of Today), *Magyar Szemle*, 14, 22–30. See in particular 23.
- ²³ Antal König (1932) 'A német katolikusok és a nemzeti szocializmus' (The German Catholics and National Socialism), *Magyar Szemle*, 15, 124–35. See in particular 133–4.
- ²⁴ Idem (1933) 'Ausztria belső kérdései' (Austria's Interior Questions), *Magyar Szemle*, 18, 67–74. See in particular 68–70.
- ²⁵ Csaba Csapody (1934) 'A keresztény rendi állam publicisztikája Ausztriában' (The Journalism and Pamphleteering of the Christian Corporist State in Austria), *Magyar Szemle*, 21, 26–31. See in particular 26.
- ²⁶ Jakab Bleyer (1929) 'A magyar és német viszony' (The Relationship between Hungarians and Germans), *Magyar Szemle*, 5, 122–4; Gyula Szekfű (1930) 'Az ifjúság társadalomszemlélete' (The Social Attitude of the Young), *Magyar Szemle*, 8, 207–15. See in particular 211.
- ²⁷ Tibor Joó (2001) 'A magyar nemzeti szellem' (The Hungarian National Spirit) in Idem, *Történefilozófia és metafizika* (Philosophy of History and Metaphysics), edited by Tamás Gusztáv Filep (Budapest: Ister), 155–99. See in particular 166; Idem, 'Öncsonkítás' (Self-mutilation) in *ibid.*, 231–6. See in particular 236. Also see Idem (1990) *A magyar nemzeteszme* (The Hungarian National Idea) (Szeged: Universum, [reprint]), 32, 141 and 168–208.
- ²⁸ Szekfű 'A 'turáni-szláv' parasztállam' (The 'Turanian-Slavic' Peasant Nation); Gyula Németh (1931) 'A magyar turánizmus' (Hungarian Turanianism), *Magyar Szemle*, 11, 132–40. See in particular 135; Idem (1932) 'Van-e még történeti érzékünk?' (Do We Still Have a Sense of History?), *Magyar Szemle*, 14, 162–72. See in particular 171.
- ²⁹ Gyula Kornis (1929) 'Nemzeti megújulás' (National Renewal), *Napkelet*, 7, 481–94 and 561–76. See in particular 482–3. See also Julius (Gyula) Kornis (1938) *Hungary and European Civilization* (Budapest: University Press), 3.
- ³⁰ László Ottlik (1934) 'Pax Hungarica', *Magyar Szemle*, 22, 289–99. See in particular 294; Béla Pukánszky (2000) *Német polgárság magyar földön* (The German Bourgeoisie on Hungarian Lands) (Budapest: Lucidus), 31 and 52–74.
- ³¹ Péter Váczy (1932) 'Szellemtörténet' (History of Ideas), *Nyugat*, 24, 101–9. See in particular 102. Also see Kornis, *Hungary*, 4, and István Dékány (1933) 'Történelmi értékelés és átértékelés' (Historical Assessment and Reassessment), *Századok*, 67, 129–64. See in particular 130.
- ³² The most theoretically rigorous and terminologically subtle analysis is that of István Dékány (1931) 'A szellemtörténet történelmi alapon megvilágítva' (The History of Ideas, Illuminated on Historical Grounds), *Századok*, 65, 337–86. Gratz gives a more accessible and trenchant discussion of similar ideas. Gusztáv Gratz (1932) 'Állami közösség és népközösség' (State Community and Volk Community), *Magyar Szemle*, 15, 297–308. See in particular 297–302. Also see Gyula Szekfű (1939) 'A népi elv két arca' (The Two Faces of the Völkisch Idea), *Magyar Szemle*, 35, 5–12. He offers a critique of specific works of historiography in Idem (1939) 'Időszerű történeti munkák' (Timely Historical Works), *Magyar Szemle*, 35, 222–30. See in particular 227.
- ³³ György Ottlik (1936) 'Ausztria problémája' (The Problem of Austria), *Magyar Szemle*, 26, 105–15. See in particular 105.

- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, 109.
- ³⁵ András Rónai (1936) 'Államterület és népiség' (The Territory of the State and the *Volkstum*), *Magyar Szemle*, 28, 113–20. See in particular 117.
- ³⁶ Kálmán Pongrácz (1937) 'A dunai államok gazdasági kapcsolatai' (The Economic Relations of the Danubian States), *Magyar Szemle*, 29, 124–32. See in particular 124 and 131; Ferdinandy 'A lázadó Koppány mítosza', 244–53. See in particular 250.
- ³⁷ György Ottlik 'Ausztia problémája', *op. cit.*, 113.
- ³⁸ Mihály Ferdinandy (1938) 'Középeurópai alakzatok' (Central European Configurations) in Ring (ed.) *Helyünk Európában*, 430–47. See in particular 433. Also see *Idem* (1941) *Mi magyarok: Tíz tanulmány a magyar történelemből* (We Hungarians: Ten Essays on Hungarian History) (Budapest: Rózsavölgyi), 403, and Domokos Kosáry (1943) *Magyarország története* (The History of Hungary) (Budapest: Országos Közoktatási Tanács), 140.
- ³⁹ Kosáry *Magyarország története*, *op. cit.*, 174.
- ⁴⁰ Ferdinandy 'Középeurópai alakzatok', *op. cit.*, 445; Kornis *Hungary*, *op. cit.*, 10.
- ⁴¹ László Ottlik *Uj Hungária felé*, *op. cit.*, 3; Gusztáv Gratz (1929) 'Polzer gróf emlékiratai' (The Memoirs of Count Polzer), *Magyar Szemle*, 5, 145–56. See in particular 147.
- ⁴² László Cs. Szabó (1933) 'Könyvek a Monarchiáról' (Books on the Monarchy), *Nyugat*, Vol. 25, No. 1, 375–8. See in particular 376.
- ⁴³ Kornis *Hungary*, *op. cit.*, 11; Kosáry *Magyarország története*, *op. cit.*, 264–5.
- ⁴⁴ Gyula Szekfű 'Politikai érzékünk társadalmi alapjairól', *op. cit.*, 297–306. See in particular 301–2.
- ⁴⁵ István Bethlen (1933) 'A magyarság helyzete a Duna-medencében' (The Situation of the Hungarian Nation in the Danubian Basin), *Magyar Szemle*, 19, 297–317. See in particular 300–2.
- ⁴⁶ László Ottlik *Pax Hungarica*, *op. cit.*, 295.
- ⁴⁷ Ferdinandy 'Középeurópai alakzatok', *op. cit.*, 444–6; *Idem Mi, magyarok*, *op. cit.*, 432.
- ⁴⁸ Ferdinandy *Mi, magyarok*, *op. cit.*, 432.
- ⁴⁹ György Ottlik 'Ausztia problémája', *op. cit.*, 113; Ferdinandy *Mi, magyarok*, *op. cit.*, 436.